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Between THE Lines™

THE POWER OF ONE ROCK

A queer youth lifeline runs through rural Michigan

TRANS EMPOWERMENT MONTH

Your guide to Stand with Trans' annual celebration

WHY THE DUNES STILL MATTERS

Late-summer reverie at queer Saugatuck haven

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The New Orleans icon on queer faith and going back to church with 'Pressing Onward'

By Chris Azzopardi



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Big Freedia. Photo: Hunter Holder

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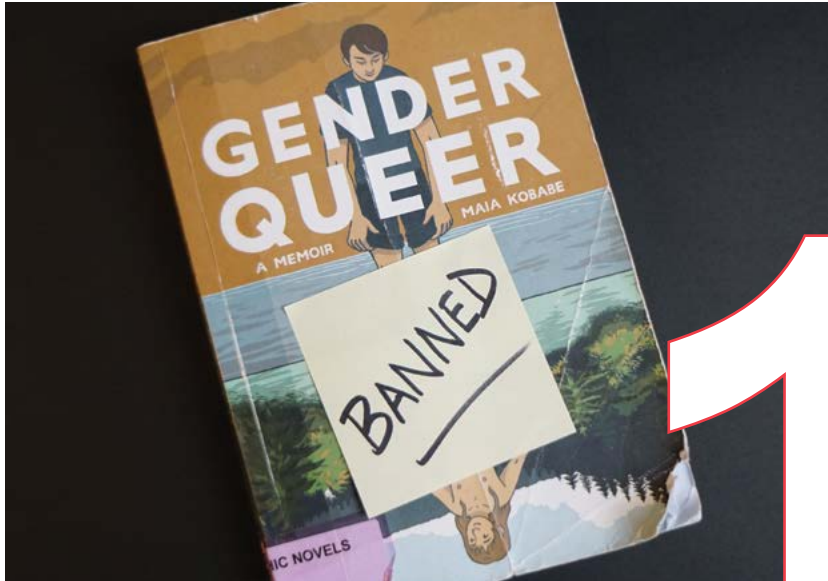
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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

Fall in Michigan means pumpkins on porches, flannels in closets and event calendars bursting with community happenings. This roundup brings you everything from literary resistance to sultry Latin stages, plus a way to support queer creators from your own living room. Think of this list as your friendly reminder that autumn is about more than raking leaves — it's about raking in joy, connection and community.



Ban the Bans!

Ferndale's Ban This Book Fest is here to prove that stories can't be silenced. This one-day extravaganza is packed with author signings, lively panels and enough bookish banter to fill a library wing. You'll meet the brilliant writers whose work has been deemed too daring, too queer or too radical for fragile censors. Plus, every dollar raised that isn't used for festival costs goes to organizations fighting book bans nationwide. Bring your tote bag, your curiosity and maybe a Sharpie for those impromptu signings.

Oct. 11, 10 a.m.- 4 p.m., Check in at Affirmations (290 W. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale). Festival takes place at multiple nearby venues. Learn more at banthisbookfest.com.



Gather at Corktown Health Gala

If your ideal night involves gourmet bites, smooth jazz and a good cause, the Corktown Health Gala checks every box. This year's theme, Black and Blues, invites guests to show off their creative formalwear in the way only a rooftop full of queerfolk can.

Expect a strolling dinner, open bar, award ceremony and music that will have you swaying before dessert. All proceeds benefit Corktown Health's lifesaving services for Metro Detroit's LGBTQ+ community. Supporting healthcare access has never looked — or sounded — this stylish.

Oct. 4, 6-10 p.m., Elevate at One Campus Martius (1 Campus Martius, Detroit). Reserve tickets at corktownhealth.org.



Connect at COLOURS Fall Business Summit

Looking to grow your business and network? The Detroit Regional LGBT Chamber of Commerce annual COLOURS Fall Business Summit offers one-on-one technical assistance, resources and lasting connections beyond typical networking events.

"All your small business questions can be answered at this summit. Learn how to integrate AI into your business and meet with specialists who can help you along your entrepreneurial journey," Chamber president Kevin Terrell Heard told BTL. Bring your laptop for hands-on AI assistance.

Oct. 9, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Pistons Performance Center (6201 2nd Ave., Detroit). Reserve space at bit.ly/colourssummit.



Mimi Southwest will appear at Solo Latin-é on Oct. 4. Photo: Instagram/ @mimisouthwest and @that.gay.photographer

Sizzle with Style at Solo Latin-é

Detroit's only all-Latin burlesque and drag revue is bringing fire to the stage just in time for Latin Heritage Month. Solo Latin-é celebrates culture, artistry and unapologetic brilliance through sultry burlesque and dazzling drag. Expect sequins, sass and performances that honor Latin heritage with every shimmy and spotlight. Produced by Marina Casanova and legendary drag performer Mimi Southwest, with additional appearances by headliner Dionysia, La Bubbleina Latinx, Sirinity Sapphire, Rosa Buxomburg and many more.

Oct. 4, 8:30 p.m., Tip-Top Showbar @ Dream (440 E. Lafayette St., Detroit). Learn more at bit.ly/sololatine.

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Stream Queer Stories

Activism that looks like cozying up with a blanket and a remote, just in time for chillier weather? Sign us up, please! Queue up queer films or shows from platforms like Revry or OutTV — or dig into LGBTQ+ documentaries free through Kanopy (available through many Michigan public library systems). Streaming queer stories made by queer folk not only supports these creators, it also reminds us that representation matters and sometimes the best resistance is refusing to disappear.

Ongoing, streaming platforms vary. revry.tv, outtv.com, kanopy.com.

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Michigan Budget Crisis Puts Trans Rights On The Line

Democratic lawmakers push back on discriminatory language in budget negotiations

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Editor's note: As of press time, the Michigan state legislature was still negotiating the details of the state budget ahead of the Oct. 1 deadline. We will update this story online as details emerge about whether any anti-trans or anti-LGBTQ+ provisions made it into the final bill.

Leading up to an Oct. 1 deadline, the Michigan legislature was working overtime to finalize a state budget that arrived in the state Senate with several anti-trans provisions baked in that reflected recent Trump administration moves. The Republican-controlled House passed a budget containing more than 15 anti-transgender restrictions on Sept. 25, setting up a clash with the Democratic-controlled Senate over language that advocacy groups warn could undermine civil rights protections Michigan's LGBTQ+ community fought decades to achieve.

Advocates like Emme Zanotti, director of advocacy and civic engagement at Equality Michigan Action Network, and state lawmakers including Rep. Laurie Pohutsky (D-Livonia) and Rep. Jason Morgan (D-Ann Arbor) were keeping a close eye on these Republican-led attempts to use the budget process to inject anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment into state policy.

Zanotti recently sounded the alarm about these provisions in a video message to supporters, explaining how Republicans are using "boilerplate language" throughout various departmental budgets to implement restrictions

based on President Donald Trump's anti-trans executive orders.

"Republicans in the state House passed a version of the budget that included something like 17 anti-trans restrictions," Zanotti explained. "They put these sections under each departmental budget and said that departments can't spend money on institutions or entities that are not complying with one of Donald Trump's really gross executive orders."

The restrictions reference Trump's executive order titled "Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal

"I have made clear to everyone in the budget process that our members would have a very difficult time voting for a budget that includes anti-trans or anti-LGBTQ+ language. I believe most of us would simply be a strong no vote on any budget that included that language."

— State Rep. Jason Morgan

Government," issued on his first day in office. That order declares, "It is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female. These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality."

State Rep. Jason Morgan emphasized that Democratic legislators are drawing a hard line against these provisions.

"I have made clear to everyone in the budget process that our members would have a very difficult time voting for a budget that includes anti-trans or anti-



State Reps. Laurie Pohutsky and Jason Morgan. Photos: State of Michigan

bipartisan budget, it really needs to be about the basics of the budget and common sense funding and should not include these right-wing value judgments trying to target marginalized communities," Morgan said.

State Rep. Laurie Pohutsky also condemned the tactics, calling out Republicans for their underhanded approach.

"Trying to hide anti-trans policy in budget boilerplate language is an underhanded attempt to hold state dollars hostage in order to attack our trans neighbors," Pohutsky told BTL. "Instead of trying to use this budget to further victimize a constituency that is already under attack every day, we need to focus on getting a budget that uplifts all Michiganders passed before the state shuts down."

What makes this tactic particularly insidious is the budget

vehicle itself. Unlike standalone legislation that can be debated and voted on individually, budget provisions are bundled together, making it difficult to isolate and reject specific harmful language without potentially forcing a government shutdown that would affect essential services statewide.

This budget maneuver fits a troubling pattern from Michigan House Republicans this session. Earlier this month, while budget negotiations stalled, the GOP-led House passed a bill restricting transgender students' bathroom access in schools. Democratic leaders called it a distraction from Republicans' failure to produce a workable budget proposal.

"While they're obsessing over bathroom policies, Michigan families need them focused on funding our schools and making the economy work," Erin Knott, executive director of Equality Michigan, said in response to that legislation.

Building a Lifeline for Rural LGBTQ+ Youth

Vermontville woman created I'll Be Your Rock to ensure no young person faces the isolation she once knew

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Two sources in this story are identified by first name only at their request for safety and privacy reasons. Additionally, this story discusses suicide. If you or someone you know is in crisis, contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988.

Christine Terpening can pinpoint the exact moment her life pivoted from survival to service. It was a Thursday in 2022, and she was watching an NBC News report about LGBTQ+ youth mental health from her home in rural Vermontville, near Lansing. The statistics were stark: 60% of LGBTQ+ kids consider suicide and self-harm. But the report also mentioned something hopeful — that having just one openly gay adult in their lives dramatically reduces those devastating statistics, and if they have one “rock” of support, the numbers drop even further.

Terpening, then in her mid-40s and just beginning to come out as lesbian, reflected on her position as a well-known community leader. She thought about all the young people she'd coached, mentored and watched grow up. While coming out publicly in this tight-knit community was daunting, she recognized a unique opportunity to support local LGBTQ+ youth.

“I just thought of all of these kids that I know and love,” she says. “I knew what I had been through and I just can't stand the thought of these kids going through that.”

As she wrestled with the decision of whether to step forward publicly, the phrase “I'll be your rock” echoed in her mind. A few days after the NBC report aired, Terpening learned that a former student had died by suicide. She knew then that she couldn't wait any longer.

“I almost immediately came out — very loud — on social media,” she recalls. “I decided that if these kids need to know one openly gay adult, well, I'll be that adult.”

That weekend, Terpening

launched I'll Be Your Rock to support LGBTQ+ youth across rural Michigan. The organization's first meeting was attended by only one brave teenager, Terpening recalls. But these days, I'll Be Your Rock hosts meetings and events year-round.

Growing up closeted in rural Michigan meant living with secrets that felt “bad and dirty,” she says. “I was trying to figure this out my whole life and hiding a secret that made me feel awful, with nobody to talk to about it, no positive representation. I was raised on a dirt road in a small community in a time where there was no positive messaging around the LGBTQ+ community.”

Terpening says the privilege of passing as straight had allowed her to be celebrated by her community in roles like rodeo queen, athlete and respected volunteer. “Would that have happened had I been an out gay woman? I don't think so,” she reflects. “I'm the lesbian who was closeted, but I knew what was happening to other people. I know the dark stories. I know about the suicides. I know about the people who left our community and never looked back.”

By the time she started hearing positive messaging about LGBTQ+ people, Terpening was married with three children. Her coming out process was gradual and painful. “I didn't just come out, I fell out, I crashed out,” she says. The end of her marriage was amicable — her ex-husband remains one of her best friends — but the internal struggle had taken its toll. Soon after the divorce, Terpening was diagnosed with breast cancer during the pandemic, adding another layer of difficulty to an already challenging period. “I was kind of in a dark spot,” she admits. “And at that point, still not out publicly.”

Terpening thought helping one kid would be “a huge success,” but within months, they were pushing tables together to accommodate all the young people and their adult mentors, called “rocks.”

“That was the moment I began

to heal,” she says. “All the things I had ever thought about myself or that I had been told through society or things that had happened in my small community, I began to heal when I started to help these kids.”

Jenn, whose 14-year-old has been attending for nearly three years, describes the atmosphere as comfortable and safe. “It's nice because they do touch on stressful topics that might be impacting them, but then we move along: ‘Let's do something fun so you guys can relax and be who you are.’”

Board member Cassey Tien, the organization's educational liaison and a Michigan teacher, emphasizes the importance of this approach from an educator's perspective. “Representation and affirmation aren't extras — they're lifelines,” she says. “I want my students and all kids in our community to grow up knowing they are worthy of joy and acceptance just as they are.”

For Jenn's child, the group has been transformative. “It's opened her up to be more vocal about everything,” Jenn says. “It helps all the kids become more vocal and more comfortable with speaking up.”

I'll Be Your Rock youth member Maddie, 18, explains how older participants help younger ones. “You are a rock and you help other people, and then you also help your little rocks as well,” she says.

The idea for Vermontville Youth Pride emerged organically from the young people themselves. During one gathering, Tien asked what they wanted from the organization. “They're like, ‘We want to go to a Pride,’” Terpening remembers. “I was like, ‘I can't take these kids to a



I'll Be Your Rock board member Cassey Tien offers an LGBTQ-affirming book to a Vermontville Youth Pride attendee. Courtesy photo

Pride.’ But we all kind of looked at each other and we were all thinking the same thing: We can bring a Pride to them.”

Within two months, they had organized the first Vermontville Youth Pride, which took place in the village in 2022. The event draws between 150 and 200 people, including roughly 50 to 60 young people who come from across Michigan — some from as far as Detroit and White Cloud, north of Muskegon almost two hours away. The 2025 celebration included drag performers, games, a bubble machine and even a petting zoo. Each year, every participant 19 and younger receives a free meal voucher. “We don't want any kid to not get a Pride trinket because they either had to eat or go without a meal,” Terpening explains.

“Events like Vermontville Youth Pride turn that support into something visible and undeniable — a public celebration that says, ‘We see you, we love you and we're rooting for you to be your authentic self,’” she adds. “Just as important, Youth Pride gives kids the chance to see joyful queer adults living full, vibrant lives.”

Parents like Jenn have found their own support network through I'll Be Your Rock. “When you're going through a situation that has to do with your child and the LGBTQ+ community, if you don't know something, they're all so willing to help,” she says. “I've even just messaged Christine before, to say, ‘Hey, I'm just having a hard time today.’”

Tien sees a broader community

See I'll Be Your Rock, page 9

Trans Empowerment Month 2025

Join Stand with Trans' free celebration of trans joy and community connection

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Block out your October calendar for Stand with Trans's sixth annual Trans Empowerment Month, a monthlong virtual celebration that's become a beloved tradition for transgender and gender expansive youth, families and allies across the country.

This year's theme, "Love Transcends," captures what makes this event so remarkable. From the comfort of your living room, you can join inspiring conversations, creative performances and empowering workshops that bring together hundreds of people who understand the power of community.

"When the world tries to tear you down, love builds you back up," says Roz Keith, executive director and founder of Stand with Trans. "That's exactly what Trans Empowerment Month represents — a powerful reminder that love transcends hate, fear and division."

Registration is free for youth and young adults through age 24, with modest fees for older participants. The monthlong celebration runs Oct. 6-30, and you can sign up now at live.eventtia.com/en/tem2025/REGISTRATION. Start time for all events is 7 p.m.

Programming highlights

Trans Empowerment Month Kickoff — Oct. 6

The celebration launches with an energizing kickoff that introduces this year's theme and gives participants a taste of the community connection that defines Trans Empowerment Month.

Our Voices, Our Power: A Youth Panel — Oct. 7

Young trans and nonbinary people take center stage to share their stories and insights. This panel, presented by Stand With Trans Youth Advisory Board



members, highlights both the challenges youth face and the incredible creativity and strength they bring to overcoming them.

Empowerment Through Hair as Black Trans Women — Oct. 8

Hair is culture, history, resistance and self-expression all wrapped into one. This session celebrates how Black trans femmes use hair as a source of confidence and community connection.

Gender-Affirming Care in Adolescence — Oct. 9

Medical professionals and advocates discuss current best practices in gender-affirming care for young people, offering practical information for youth and families seeking affirming healthcare.

Understanding Eating Disorders in Trans and Gender-Expansive People — Oct. 14

This important session explores

how gender identity, body image and societal pressures can intersect with eating disorders, offering compassionate resources for healing and support.

The speaker lineup brings together advocates, artists and community leaders from across the country. Bernie Wagenblast, the voice of the New York City subway who became a prominent transgender visibility advocate after coming out in 2023, will share her journey. Comedian James Tom, known for his work on HBO Max's "Our Flag Means Death," brings his signature humor and insight as a transmasculine performer.

Detroit's own Ahya Simone, the only Black transgender harpist in the world, represents the innovative artistry that flourishes in Michigan's LGBTQ+ community. Princess Jauan Durbin, a Morehouse College alumnus and Forbes Under 30 Scholar who founded the Southern Kiki Leaders Collective, brings expertise in HIV prevention advocacy. And Michigan's Emme

Zanotti, senior director of Movement Building and Political Affairs at Equality Michigan Action Network, rounds out the lineup with her coalition-building experience.

Why Trans Empowerment Month matters

What started as a way to create safe virtual spaces has grown into something that reaches far beyond Michigan's borders. Last year's event drew more than 200 participants, and this year promises even broader reach.

Keith emphasizes the community connection at the heart of the programming. "Our attendees don't just walk away with new knowledge — they walk away knowing they belong, they matter and they are deeply loved."

For a community that often faces hostility and legislative attacks, Trans Empowerment

Month offers something essential: a full month dedicated to celebration, learning and genuine connection. And in an era when access to affirming spaces can be limited, the virtual format means anyone with an internet connection can join.

Founded by Keith after her own experience as the mother of a transgender son, Stand with Trans has been supporting transgender youth and their families since 2015. The Michigan-based organization provides year-round peer support groups and educational resources, but Trans Empowerment Month represents their biggest annual effort to bring the community together.

Whether you're looking to learn something new, connect with others or simply celebrate trans joy, there's space for you in this October celebration. Visit standwithtrans.org for more information about the organization's ongoing work supporting transgender youth and families.

impact. "When students feel safe and supported, they are able to thrive academically, socially and emotionally," she notes. "In a small, rural community like ours, that kind of visibility and affirmation is powerful. It says loudly that you are seen, you are valued and you are not alone."

Recently, after reaching out to the parents of a young member expressing thoughts of self-harm on the group's Discord, Terpening watched the situation improve

dramatically. "This kiddo at the next meeting was just so happy and said, 'I don't feel that way now,'" she recalls. "I just thought, 'Oh, thank God these kids have a space where they feel OK to speak like that and then they're OK when they get help.'"

I'll Be Your Rock's mission statement includes a phrase that captures Terpening's broader vision: "Coming out should be a happy story, not

a survival story." "Our number one goal is to reduce the suicide rates," Terpening says. "But number two is we want these kids to have happy childhoods. We don't want them to just survive childhood. We want them to have a great one."

The organization now operates multiple chapters across Michigan, with plans to expand further. A recent foundation grant will help them begin work in Texas. Terpening's ultimate vision is ambitious: "If I had the resources, I would have a chapter within 30 minutes of every kid in the United States because they're out there hurting." Currently, some kids travel up to an hour and a half to attend I'll Be Your Rock meetings, underscoring the need for more local chapters.

"It's very hard," she admits. "It's especially challenging to keep finding new funds, but we keep trying."

As young people like Maddie prepare for college and new chapters in their lives, they carry with them the confidence that comes from knowing they're not alone. Maddie plans to study computer science, possibly in Canada. In the meantime, the foundation of support from I'll Be Your Rock provides a sense of hope during uncertain times.

For Jenn's family, I'll Be Your Rock has become something deeper than a support group. "It's more like a family to us," she says. "It's really great for the kids, and I really wish they had one around when I was younger."

"I often say that every kid should come from a community that loves them, supports them and celebrates them," Terpening reflects. "That's what we're doing."

The woman who once felt isolated and ashamed in her small town now serves as living proof that rural communities can become sources of affirmation. For the young people who travel from across Michigan to attend I'll Be Your Rock meetings, Terpening represents something precious: the openly gay adult she wished she'd had growing up, ready to be their rock when they need it most.

Learn more about I'll Be Your Rock at illbeyourrock.org.



I'll Be Your Rock founder Christine Terpening.

Feeling Like You're Holding Your Breath? Let's Gather and Heal.



BY MARK
MCMILLAN

When was the last time you exhaled fully? Before I got sober from alcohol, this phrase meant nothing to me. However, when I started my recovery journey, I began to connect with this simple phrase more and more.

As an addiction therapist, I now integrate breathwork and mindful breathing into my practice. Today, many of us in the queer community are holding our breath — bracing against waves of uncertainty, fear and fatigue. With this in mind, I believe the need for queer-centered healing is more important than ever before. This is why I invite you to join me at Room to Breathe, a mini retreat, on Saturday, Oct. 25 at 9 a.m.

I founded McMillan Behavioral Health and Addiction Services (MBHS) in October 2020, during the height of the pandemic. In addition to being the owner, I am also a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) and a Certified Advanced Alcohol & Drug Counselor (CAADC) with the state of Michigan.

Another important part of my practice is my certification as a Trauma Informed Care provider. While "trauma" is often used casually today, a trauma-informed lens helps us understand its deeper impact on queer lives. Emerging research shows that simply growing up LGBTQ+ — especially in unsupportive environments — can mirror the effects of adverse childhood experiences. These early wounds often shape how we navigate adulthood, relationships and safety.

And we see this play out in the

news every day. New laws seem to be constantly enacting that chip away at our rights, deepening the oppression faced by our community. One client recently shared, "I no longer feel safe even holding my partner's hand in public, and we've been married for over 10 years."

The reality is that our history is full of tragedy and heartache. But another thing is true, too: Our community is resilient and strong. We will overcome and survive this latest assault on our basic human rights. But to get there, part of our individual work must include small, intentional spaces to pause, reconnect and breathe so we can continue the journey toward collective healing and sustainable resilience.

The Room to Breathe mini-retreat emerged from listening to countless queer and LGBTQ+ clients who feel unsafe, persecuted and under attack daily. For many in our community, simply existing as their authentic self has become a political act that carries real risk.

This retreat creates a sanctuary where queer folx can gather to fully exhale and draw strength from sitting in community with other affirming people. In these spaces, we remember we are not alone — and that our shared presence becomes an act of resistance and healing.

Ready to sign up? Here's what you should know about the Room to Breathe mini-retreat:

On Oct. 25 at 8:30 a.m., we'll gather in my comfortable Ferndale office space (800 Hilton Road) and share light refreshments (yes, including coffee and tea!). We'll dive in at 9 a.m.

Through creative reflection and

community conversation, we'll explore themes like:

- Queer joy
- Self-compassion
- Resilience
- Gentle mindfulness practices
- Building a toolkit to help us slow down and breathe more fully

This will be a space where queer joy and self-compassion are not just welcomed — they're centered. This space is designed for queer and LGBTQ+ folx of all genders and identities.

I created Room to Breathe so that our community can enjoy the tangible benefits gained from engaging in safe, authentic connection. Space is limited, and we expect it to fill quickly — so if this speaks to you, we'd love to have you join us.

Come as you are. Leave with breath in your lungs, warmth in your heart and with the reminder that you are never alone.

Room to Breathe takes place on Saturday, Oct. 25 at McMillan Behavioral Health Services (800 Hilton Road, Ferndale). Doors open at 8:30. To register, visit MarkMcMillan.com.



End-of-Summer Reverie at The Dunes Resort

As fall settles in, The Dunes lingers in memory — a Midwest haven for queer joy, mischief and connection that endures beyond summer's end



Guests and visitors at The Dunes Resort let loose at the venue's club. Courtesy photo

BY SAMUEL SCHWINDT

We were greeted by a brief wand of a metal detector before a drag queen claimed our crumbled cash to enter. The front deck of The Dunes Resort was matronly and resolute; the veranda only slightly concealing what is beyond. Queer people scantily clad waded into the line; inside, the sweaty circuit extravaganza of gay hedonism awaited.

The Dunes' website states it "is a welcoming haven where everyone is free to be their authentic self, regardless of who they are or who they love." The misspelling of "everyone" is what sells it to me:

It's a little rough around the edges. Its chattering legacy for the past several decades reflects elsewhere. (How old is that carpet in the bar, one wonders? OK, me).

Owner Mike Jones purchased the property in 1999. There were "bulletholes" in the window, said the owner, and guests still sneakily parked in the back for a questioning public not to observe. He inherited a legacy: a safe haven in the Midwest for gay resort-life that secretly rivals the historic Fire Island and Provincetown on the east coast. The Dunes formed, however, with a word-of-mouth undercommons that fuels friends, friends of friends and others to

commence a summer getaway community. Jones told me couples have met here (as far back as the '80s) and still return for forays — whether it's because of DJ Harry Styles or their upcoming Halloween Night at The Dunes and Oktoberfest Weekend celebrations in October.

A Chicago Tribune feature published in 1997 mentioned the burgeoning LGBTQ+ life in Saugatuck, remarking on an ambiguous gay beach and places

"There's truth to the slight joke my friends and I make: that we can't really talk about what we got up to over the weekend in the workplace on Monday."

to stay among other features of the city. The destination's resonance within Chicago is not unfounded; the typical uncanny nature of running into people you see at any gay club throughout the U.S.

(and, ahem, some experiences in Mexico City even), plays here. Jones remarked to me upon the camaraderie and convivial nature of their space; this filters through, of course, in any queer space at night. Even if you don't know names, people are still comfortable in that enveloping anonymity. The article, of course, also mentioned the nearby school of art, Ox-Bow School of Art and Artists' Residency, founded in 1910.

"We owe them everything," Jones said about the school that offers residencies, classes and

See **The Dunes Resort**, page 15

Quiet Resistance Grows as Bathroom Bills Target Michigan and Beyond

Marcy Rheintgen's faith-driven arrest highlights LGBTQ+ resistance to anti-trans laws



BY ANNI ARBOUR

Editor's note: The Michigan House passed House Bill 4024 on Sept. 5 on a party-line vote. The legislation would restrict bathroom and changing room access based on sex assigned at birth. Senate Majority Leader Winnie Brinks called the bill "dead on arrival" and said the Senate will not take up the legislation.

Twenty-year-old Marcy Rheintgen knew exactly what would happen when she walked into the women's restroom at the Florida Capitol Building on March 19. She had planned every detail of her act of civil disobedience, even writing advance warning letters to over 160 state representatives and government officials.

"Hi, my name is Marcy Rheintgen, I'm a 20-year-old college student and I'm writing this letter to tell you that I am going to break the law," she wrote in those letters. "On March 14th, at around 3 pm, I intend to use the women's bathroom on the second floor of the Capitol building, across from room 222C. I know that as a transgender woman, this means that I will probably be arrested."

And she was.

The University of Kansas student had planned the protest for her return from spring break. Wearing a flowing white dress, she entered the Capitol building that afternoon, looking like any other young college student touring the facility.

As she approached the second-floor women's restroom, a female Capitol law enforcement officer immediately met her, asking "Are you Marcy Rheintgen?" and warning her not to enter or risk arrest.

According to her arrest report, Marcy responded, "I am here to

break the law." She then entered the restroom with Tampa Bay Times reporter Romy Ellenbogen, who had been alerted to her intentions.

Marcy, a devout Catholic, originally planned to pray the rosary once inside the restroom. She never got the chance. As she washed her hands, the female officer immediately detained her, confiscated her rosary and led her away.

The New York Times reported April 7 that Marcy was charged with "trespass on property after warning," not specifically for violating the state's bathroom law, the "Safety in Private Spaces Act."

After being held at the Leon County Detention Facility for about one day, Marcy was given a notice to appear in court May 8 and released.

Faith as motivation

What drove this previously non-activist Midwestern college student to engage in such high-profile civil disobedience was something often missing from news coverage: her Catholic faith.

"My Catholic faith is one hundred percent instrumental in my act of civil disobedience, but I want to be very clear: I'm not squaring my Catholicism with transgenderism," Marcy told me.

Many religious LGBTQ+ people struggle with the perception that faith and queer identity are incompatible — a view often reinforced by religious institutions that condemn LGBTQ+ people. While most trans people generally cringe at the term "transgenderism" — primarily used by transphobes hoping to portray gender dysphoria as an ideology rather than an identity — Marcy's usage reveals her attempt to navigate this complex terrain. For her, there's no contradiction to resolve; instead, her faith calls her to act with love

and seek dignity for all people.

"People want to be angry, they want to hate one another, they want there to be an argument and they don't want to see the people on the other side as human beings," she said. "Jesus sat and ate with all; God loves all his children. We are in a very culturally evangelical society where if you [do] anything seen as a moral transgression, you're not allowed to be treated with respect."

"I wasn't raised in a religious family, but I became religious in high school. I went on a retreat called Steubenville, and it deeply affected my spirituality," she said. "Jesus ultimately is about love and mercy. He loved the Pharisees; He loved the people who crucified Him. How many people in politics do that nowadays?"

Living her beliefs

Marcy has had ample opportunity to practice what she preaches. Since her arrest, reactions have ranged from comparisons to Rosa Parks from her supporters to vicious personal attacks from conservative critics. Conservative provocateur Marycate Delvey has engaged in a particularly harsh campaign against her, doxxing her, trying to humiliate her and accusing Marcy of vile crimes. Marcy has responded with well-reasoned pleas for understanding and remarkable grace.

"I'm not Jesus. I'm not even close to [being] Jesus," Marcy said. "I'm a grave sinner; I'm trying to follow his teachings. I'm trying to love everyone, even if they're shitty to me."

Religion and civil disobedience have a long history together, from Thoreau to Gandhi to Dr. King. Even though it appears incongruous in this divisive era — when transgender identity is more likely to be condemned by supposedly religious believers —



Marcy Rheintgen. Courtesy photo

perhaps there's a place for another path for those fighting for gender rights.

Marcy's calls for dignity and respect may fall upon deaf ears, and there may be a touch of naivety to her optimistic viewpoint of human nature. But if so, it's the sort of fresh-faced naivety of youth flush with the positive possibilities of a better future.

"I truly do love my enemies. I love the people who hate me," she said. "I even think it would be kinder if I loved them even more. I'm not doing enough."

In full disclosure, I, too, am a Catholic. Unlike Marcy, I don't attend church regularly, but I do try to practice its ideals espousing love and kindness. Yet, there is much of what the church teaches with which I strongly disagree, starting with the views expressed in its 2024 declaration that abjectly condemn

gender-affirming surgery as a "grave violation of human dignity."

Marcy has found a way to transcend that incongruity. Her intended act of praying the Rosary upon entering the woman's restroom, is possibly the most Catholic thing imaginable. While some may see her act as a cry for attention or fodder for TikTok celebrity, a knowing Catholic like myself sees the underlying motivations. And wonders if I'm doing enough in practicing what I preach.

On June 20, Leon County Court Judge Lashawn Riggins dismissed the case against Marcy based on a filing error by the prosecutor. Notably, in the original court filing Marcy was identified under her deadname, but in the official dismissal, she was properly accorded the respect of being called "Marcy Rheintgen."

Transgender for Everybody or You Can Say Bye-Bye to Your Little Government

BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI



We're headed for a government shutdown and we know who to blame. Republicans have a majority in the U.S. House and Senate. They have the presidency. They even have the Supreme Court. So obviously if the government shuts down it will be the fault of... transgender people.

And how do we know that? Because Donald Trump said so, that's how.

"They want to have transgender for everybody," Trump said to a gaggle of reporters on Sept. 26. "These people are crazy, the Democrats. So if it has to shut down, it'll have to shut down. But they're the ones that are shutting down the government."

You heard it: Transgender for everybody. That's what the Democrats want.

Ideally, "transgender for everybody" means that anyone who needs it can get gender-affirming care.

More likely, it just means that the most powerful man in the world is a dangerous anti-trans lunatic.

In case you're wondering if Trump misspoke, the day before he posted a rant on Truth Social making the claim that Democrats want to "force Taxpayers to fund Transgender surgery for minors" and "allow men to play in women's sports, and essentially create Transgender operations for everybody."

Granted, I don't know what that means. I mean, he says "essentially" here and specifies "operations," unlike his less

[Democrats] don't seem to care whether any of us live or die. Why should we even believe they care about our healthcare?

specific "transgender for everybody" statement the next day.

So I don't know. Like, does he mean that everyone has to be transgender now? Everyone has to get an operation or can get an operation? And if someone doesn't need or want a "transgender operation" can they trade it for a type of

operation they do need?

I guess I need to see the plan laid out.

Granted, he made other totally bullshit claims on Truth Social, too. But transgender people were mentioned two separate times in the 91-word post about the pending government shutdown.

"They are threatening to shut down the Government of the United States unless they can have over \$1 Trillion Dollars in new spending to continue free healthcare for Illegal Aliens (A monumental cost!), force Taxpayers to fund Transgender surgery for minors, have dead people on the Medicaid roles, allow Illegal Alien Criminals to steal Billions of Dollars in American Taxpayer Benefits, try to force our Country to again open our Borders to Criminals and to the World, allow men to play in women's sports, and essentially create Transgender operations for everybody," Trump posted.

I know this is elitist, but I really wish the President of the United States had even cursory knowledge of how this country works and/or did not only tell lies.

To be clear, the U.S. doesn't spend a trillion dollars on "free healthcare" for undocumented people nor do they

"steal" billions of dollars in benefits. As for the Medicaid roles, there will probably always be dead people enrolled in Medicaid for the same reason there will always be dead people registered to vote. People don't just magically disappear from databases once they take their last breath. Democrats also

don't beckon the world's criminals to come to the U.S.

And yet, so many people believe this shit.

I hope that Trump goes down as the most anti-trans U.S. president in history. What I mean is that I hope that we never have another president whose animus toward transgender people steers his decisions about everything, even whether the government should stay open or not.

And, look, the Democrats should absolutely not support the kind of draconian shit Republicans are demanding just to keep the government open. Making a deal with Republicans is dumb. In the end, the Republicans can and will do whatever they want. They have the majority.

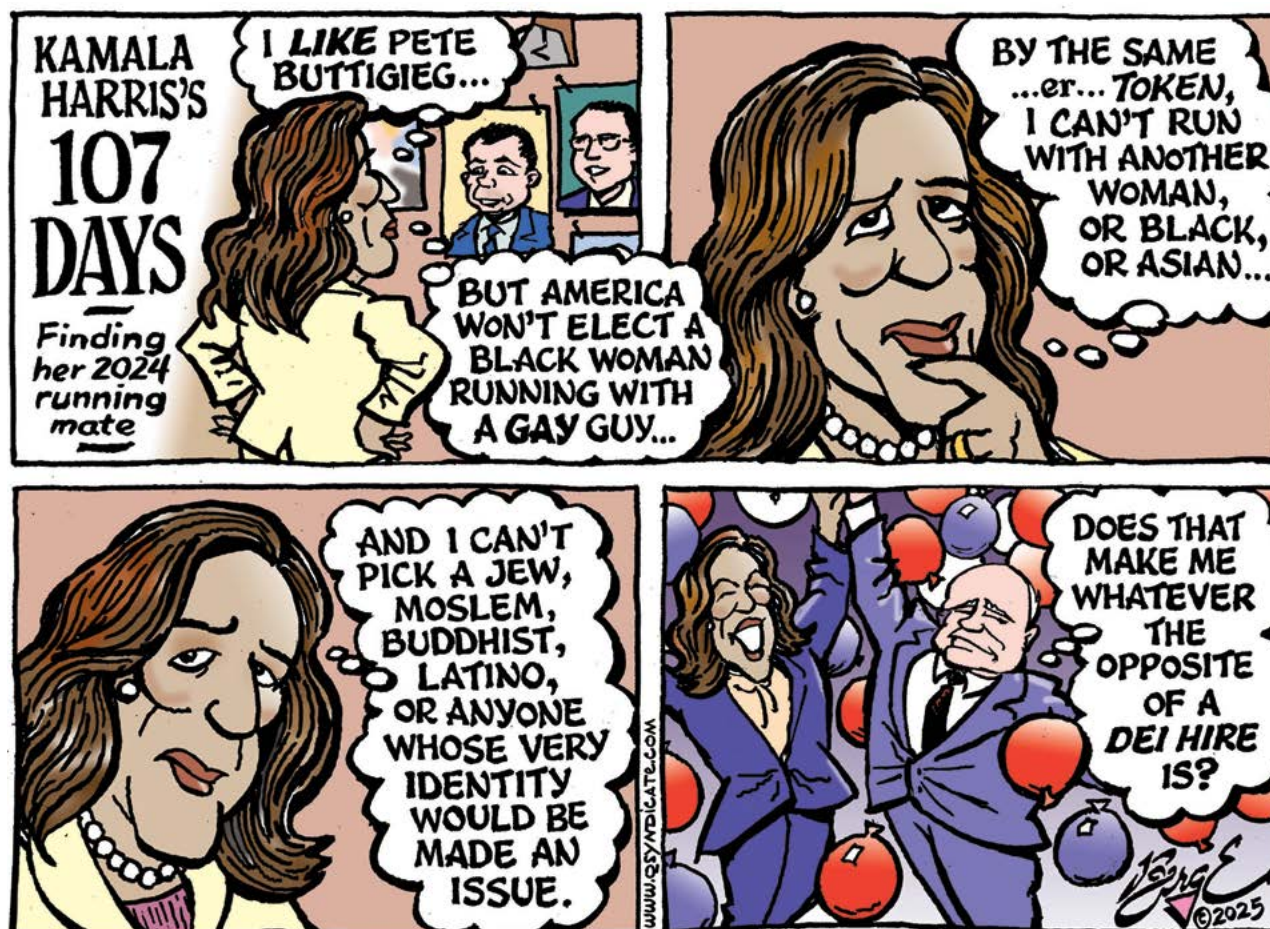
But the Democrats have shown very little in the way of strength when dealing with the fascist takeover of the U.S. All they want to talk about is healthcare (and, let's be specific, they are not talking about trans healthcare).

As The Advocate reports, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and other Democrats are demanding "a permanent expansion of the premium tax credit structure and to roll back recent coverage restrictions in the health insurance marketplace."

Yes, I also fell asleep reading that.

Healthcare is important, of course! But Democrats are ignoring EVERYTHING ELSE. Transgender people being demonized. Immigrants being snatched off the street. The Trump Administration is murdering people at sea. RFK Jr. is letting his brainworm run the Department of Health and Human Services.

Unfortunately, Democrats aren't demanding transgender for ANYbody. They aren't standing up for even the most vulnerable people under attack. They don't seem to care whether any of us live or die. Why should we even believe they care about our healthcare?



THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

Ringwald Theatre Brings ‘Golden Girls’ Energy to ‘Silver Foxes’

Picture it: Palm Springs, present day. Three older gay men rescue their best friend from a homophobic assisted living facility, befriend his younger boyfriend (affectionately dubbed “The Twink”) and form a fabulous found family while dodging stray cats, navigating hookup apps and fending off the real estate-hungry lesbian couple next door.

“Silver Foxes,” hitting the Ringwald Theatre for its Michigan premiere on Oct. 3, is written by “Golden Girls”

writers Stan Zimmerman and James Berg. ACLU of Michigan’s Jay Kaplan stars as Benny. He describes the play’s deeper message: “Many older LGBTQ+ adults may not have family members who are going to be there to take care of them. This show asks the question a lot of us have had: ‘How do you form your own family and take care of each other?’”

The ensemble cast also features Lindel Salow as Chuck, Joe Bailey as Cecil, Justin Bugeja as The Twink and Melissa Beckwith in multiple roles. Directors Matthew Rindfleisch and Gretchen Schock helm the production.

Catch “Silver Foxes” Oct. 3-27, with a special talkback featuring Zimmerman on Oct. 26. Reserve tickets at theringwald.com.



“Silver Foxes” cast members. Photo: The Ringwald Theatre

Michigan Rep Proposes Ban on Transgender Representation Online

On Sept. 11, State Rep. Josh Schriver (R-Oxford) introduced House Bill 4938, which would ban pornography statewide while specifically criminalizing transgender representation online, including non-pornographic content. The “Anticorruption of Public Morals Act” targets material showing “a disconnection between biology and gender,” imposing felony penalties of up to 20 years in prison and \$100,000 fines for distribution.

The bill requires internet service providers to implement content filtering and block VPNs, applying to all Michigan residents regardless of age. While the legislation has virtually no chance of passage in the Democratic-controlled Senate, advocates warn it attempts to equate LGBTQ+ existence with obscenity.

Nessel Shows Support for Trans Students Nationwide

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel joined eight other state attorneys general in a back-to-school video message pledging continued support for transgender

students. The National Women’s Law Center collaboration, titled “We Have Your Back: A Message to Trans Students From State Attorneys General,” features top lawyers from New York, Oregon, California, Minnesota, Delaware, Vermont and Maryland.

“Donald Trump has been going after the rights of trans students, their families and anyone who supports them. And in Michigan, we don’t tolerate hate and we do fight back,”

Nessel says in the video.

Nessel, who has consistently championed LGBTQ+ rights throughout her tenure, promises her office will hold schools accountable under state law and ensure students aren’t facing hostile learning environments. The attorneys general close with an uplifting message: “You belong here. You inspire us. And we do love you.” Check out the video at bit.ly/46Jfccm.

Don’t Miss Sapphic Social’s Fall Night Out

Midwest Sapphic Society hosts Sapphic Social, an exclusive evening for lesbians and queer women, from 7-10 p.m. Oct. 11 at Mother Handsome in Oak Park. The women-owned, queer-friendly venue will offer a full food menu, craft cocktails and coffee bar in a space reserved entirely for the sapphic community. Expect curated music, queer vendors and opportunities to connect in a relaxed atmosphere. Tickets available at bit.ly/4mJET2v.

Doja Cat Announces 2026 Tour, Detroit Stop

Boundary-pushing pop icon Doja Cat is bringing her biggest tour yet to Little Caesars Arena on Oct. 1, 2026. Doja’s “Tour Ma Vie” world tour supports her fifth studio album, “Vie,” and marks her first time headlining across multiple continents, hitting major cities including São Paulo, London and Los Angeles before wrapping at Madison Square Garden in New York City in December. Tickets on sale Oct. 10 at 313presents.com.

Mark Duplass Claps Back at Transphobes Over Trans Film Fund

After transphobes flooded his social media with backlash over a new filmmaking grant for trans creators, actor and producer Mark Duplass fired back. The Found Footage Feature Fund, a partnership between Duplass Brothers Productions and the Transgender Film Center, offers a \$25,000 grant. Duplass thanked critics for “confirming the need to support the voices of those who merely wish to exist without discrimination.” The fund fully finances a micro-budget production with consultation sessions.



Mark Duplass.
Photo: Instagram/@markduplass

‘A Church with AIDS’: Podcast Reclaims the Sacred Sound of Queer Survival

Before livestreams, there were cassette tapes. And one church saved them all.

BY TED KERR

Decades before COVID-19 lockdowns inspired churches to move online, members of Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of San Francisco delivered cassette recordings of Sunday services to homebound parishioners living with HIV.

Now, those recordings have been resurrected. The new podcast *When We All Get to Heaven* uses those tapes — focused on the pretreatment era — alongside interviews and archival audio to tell how MCC San Francisco, an LGBTQ+ congregation, fought not just to survive the AIDS crisis but to thrive.

Over 11 episodes, beginning Oct. 5, 2025, listeners learn how clergy, laypeople and parishioners wrestled with mortality, faith and the labor of sustaining a queer church amid mass death and upheaval.

When *We All Get to Heaven* was created by Lynne Gerber, Siri Colom and Ariana Nedelman. Below, Gerber — who narrates the podcast — speaks about the project and what it means to be a “church with AIDS.”

How did you learn about the tapes?

I had been a longtime friend of MCC San Francisco. I was close to people who were becoming clergy, and they often invited me to attend. I’m not Christian. I’m not a lesbian. I’m not a joiner, so I never joined. But I went a lot, and one day, I was in the church office when a longtime member named Steve asked me if I knew about the cassettes that he had stored under the church floor. He had saved them from being thrown out during a church move.

When he first mentioned them, I thought there would be a few dozen tapes. Not so. There was a collection of 1,200 cassettes of church services from 1987 through 2003, each labeled with the date and a few additional details. I knew from the labels that this was a monumental collection that needed to be preserved.



MCC pastor Jim Mitulski. Photo: MCC of San Francisco

What was it like to listen to the tapes for the first time?

I listened to the tapes for the first time in 2011 at MCC San Francisco, at 150 Eureka Street, which is where MCC had been through the years this podcast is exploring. I was working with a team of undergrads from Berkeley, some of whom had never used a cassette player.

Listening to the tapes was like tuning into sound that was already all around me, in that building, in the ether. As we listened, I got the overwhelming sense that this was a community collection, and the community needs the opportunity to listen.

MCC San Francisco calls itself

“a church with AIDS.” What does that mean?

The phrase comes from an article written by MCC pastor Jim Mitulski and then-student clergy Kittredge Cherry: “We Are the Church Alive, the Church with AIDS.” It was published in *The Christian Century* magazine in 1988.

To understand the phrase, context is helpful. MCC was founded on the affirmation and acceptance of queerness, queer sexuality and marginalized genders. By the time AIDS was emerging as a crisis, the church already understood the power of stepping into stigma and not giving into the cultural pressure of shame. Calling itself a church with AIDS was another step in that

process. The epidemic was set up in moral terms, with this idea that to get AIDS you had to do something pretty “un-Christian.” MCC did not fall for the setup. Instead, it did the work to be a church where people with AIDS were involved at every step for as long as they could or wanted to be.

Because of this foundation, MCC was able to do things that other churches couldn’t. For example, in the early days of AIDS, a lot of churches were fighting about maintaining the practice of the common cup, the shared vessel used during communion. They were afraid that communion would be the path to HIV transmission. Not MCC. They shaped their communion ritual around people with AIDS in different

ways. They knew that people with AIDS didn’t get touched, so they integrated prayer where people held hands into the communion service. People at MCC services received communion from people visibly sick with AIDS. And when MCC did alternatives to the common cup, it was more often to protect people with HIV vulnerable to transmission from others.

Being a queer church with AIDS also meant that no one was or is excluded from being a mourner. There is a place for friends, a same-sex partner, multiple partners and parents, a place where HIV status, religious affiliation and

See **MCC-SF**, page 20



The pool at The Dunes Resort in Saugatuck. Courtesy photo

◀ **The Dunes Resort**
Continued from page 10

other art programming. Within art schools in Saugatuck and beyond, it is verifiable their communities foster and nurture queer life. A sexuality and gender-bending camaraderie flourishes among easels and the “personal is political” discourse within art schools. Beyond Ox-bow, Saugatuck’s art continued to build when a former pie factory was rehabbed to be the Saugatuck Center for the Arts.

On a stroll seeking respite from the heat, my partner and I encountered the work of John Caleb Pendleton in his solo exhibition “sōw [in sorrow].” A large-scale installation consumed the entire space — the ceiling, the walls, and shadows on the floors. Dried flowers and plants were draped in curvaceous, nestling wombs. Dried flora-ephemera cascaded resolute darkness throughout the space, with non-smooth edges. Even with darkened walls and a cavernous encounter of brambles and branches, the exhibition was comfortingly bleak. The post-apocalyptic catastrophe of the loss of a loved one is enmeshed as a funerary display of nurturing mourning. It’s a quotidian reclamation of humankind’s relationship to pine and grind — the self-protection required in the devastations of life’s tumultuous reality. Like Saugatuck, the



A drag performer collects tips from guests at The Dunes Resort. Courtesy photo

exhibition was against smoothness.

Besides the local lore-building and site-specific experiences in Saugatuck, The Dunes was a stealthy getaway for my partner and me, a savoring of gay community while we were staying with my family, my toddler-nephew promptly waking us at 6 a.m. every day. There had to be some sacrifices to prevent pesky hangovers in familial bonding activities in the daytime. No escape was made to The Woods (the owner didn’t particularly want to talk about those cruising grounds for this story, by the way). A reminder of the comforting anonymity pervaded, though: I made a bathroom buddy innocuously shy at the urinals, remarking to me if it was “cool” to check out men’s butts and packages within. He proceeded to invite us to his friends — we didn’t go for fear of a good time breaking the bewitching hour.

It was the people that we didn’t know who were the most pleasurable (even though we all have an underground network in the way gay people know each other, wink). There’s truth to the slight joke my friends and I make: that we can’t really talk about what we got up to over the weekend in the workplace on Monday. My family and I didn’t discuss it. That doesn’t mean it wasn’t necessary, or impactful. The Uber drivers of the area joked their whole weekends were carting to and fro to the resort. It wasn’t a complaint on their part; more just a sly grin with teeth-glinting support.

But that makes it special: There’s gatekeeping here in a revolutionary way. I don’t think we need to let “everyone” know the slippery secrets of a spilled vodka-soda on the house music dancefloor. Some things can just stay between us.

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Fear and Defiance as Michigan Health Systems End Gender-Affirming Care

How LGBTQ+ community members, political leaders and health professionals are responding to federal pressure

BY ERICK DÍAZ VELIZ

At the intersection of Fuller Road and Medical Center Drive outside the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor, a wave of chants criticizing the healthcare institution echoed alongside shouts and honking of drivers.

The scene was a show of frustration and anger, all in support of transgender youth who will now be denied gender-affirming care due to the hospital system's decision to end that care.

At least 100 demonstrators, carrying signs and waving transgender flags, were there among students and community members who gathered on Sept. 11 to protest the decision following federal pressure.

The statewide hospital network in August said that it would stop providing medically necessary gender-affirming healthcare services — such as prescribing puberty blockers and gender-affirming hormones — for patients under age 19. University of Michigan Health and its Michigan Medicine brand argued the decision was made due to an ongoing federal “criminal and civil investigation into gender-affirming care for minors.”

“The [system] is one of multiple institutions across the country that have received a federal subpoena as part of a criminal and civil investigation into gender-affirming care for minors,” said Mary Masson, senior director of public relations at Michigan Medicine, in a statement in response to the rally. “In light of that investigation, and given escalating external threats and risks, we will no longer provide gender-affirming hormonal therapies and puberty blocker medications for minors.”

In mid-July, the U.S. Department of Justice issued several subpoenas to dozens of healthcare institutions and doctors across the country “involved in performing transgender medical procedures on children.” The action by the federal government



A demonstrator at the rally for gender-affirming care on U-M campus, Ann Arbor, on Sept. 11, 2025. Photo: Erick Diaz/Michigan Advance

under an executive order issued by President Donald Trump, seeking to limit funding for hospitals and providers offering gender-affirming care to minors, are aimed at what the administration has called “gender ideology extremism and restoring biological truth.”

At the rally, demonstrators were joined by a series of speakers, including community leaders, local politicians and hospital officials, all focused on the vital importance of these services for many transgender youths. They also touched on the threat posed by the decision and the ripple effect for other Michigan health institutions, bolstered by anonymous testimonies from affected transgender minors.

Washtenaw County Commissioner Yousef Rabhi, a former state representative and the legislative director for the Michigan Nurses Association, said transgender youth in his community deserve necessary and life-sustaining care. Taking that away from them was “a crime.”

“And at the end of the day, I want to remind us all of the people who make the decisions at this university,” Rabhi said. “They’re elected by all of us. Every two years, you have an opportunity to elect regents. Use that opportunity to hold them accountable.”

Christina Helou, a doctor of physical therapy at University of Michigan Health, told Michigan Advance that restricting access

to gender-affirming care was irresponsible.

“This decision is not based on fact,” Helou said. “It is not based on science. It is not based on medical health care evidence. It is strictly based on political pressure from this administration because they’re transphobic.”

Although the university didn’t specify details of the federal subpoena it received, a report from Talking Points Memo showed that the justice department’s requests received on July 14 was similar to those sent to Philadelphia’s Children’s Hospital, where “individual doctors received a hold order not to destroy documents” and the DOJ was “pursuing a civil and criminal investigation.”

Doctors are now worried they could face heavy legal fees and potentially lose their medical licenses.

The report, published on Aug. 25, also explains that U-M members were already aware that they would receive new federal requirements a few weeks in advance. DOJ lawyers were investigating doctors for allegedly misusing their authority to prescribe medication, among other potential charges.

Within these federal requests, The New York Times reported that, based on the subpoena sent to The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, the justice department requested detailed personal information of minor patients. This included their names, dates of birth, social security

numbers and parents' information. Additionally, information about hospital staff, contractors, and affiliates involved in gender-affirming health services, as well as communications between the hospital and providers, was also required.

On Sept. 11, Corewell Health released a statement to its patients announcing it, too, would no longer provide gender-affirming hormonal therapies and puberty blockers to minors, arguing a "serious risk of legal and regulatory action." Corewell is now the latest Michigan healthcare system to discontinue gender-affirming care for minors under federal pressure.

On Sept. 13, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel said she was deeply disappointed in Corewell's decision.

"They have chosen to capitulate to the federal administration's discriminatory campaign against the trans community, despite Corewell not being a target of any federal action in this realm," Nessel said in a statement. "Corewell's shortsighted approach to conform their treatment options and 'obey in advance' fails to adequately consider the long-term consequences to the health, safety and well-being of their patients. Michigan law has not changed; gender-affirming care remains legal and is approved healthcare by leading healthcare associations."

Nessel also said the hospitals have chosen to disregard science, best practices,

and the recommendations of every major medical society in the nation. She said that created a dangerous precedent that could have long-lasting implications on all patients, not just transgender youth.

"We have seen virtue signaling from the federal administration that they intend to detrimentally attack many other areas of public health and medical treatment," Nessel said. "We must ask ourselves: what other medical practices or care will this Administration target next — reproductive care, vaccines, scientific studies — and will our healthcare institutions quickly succumb to such pressure each and every time?"

Parents of transgender children have been left in a state of uncertainty and frustration.

"She had her exit appointment last Thursday, and after that, she became aware that the world is coming to get her. She is devastated," said Kami Michels, 46, a board member of the Jim Toy Community Center, who told the Advance about hardships her 16-year-old transgender daughter has felt since U-M stopped her gender-affirming care after five years.

Even though Masson specified that U-M is working closely with all impacted patients, and that they "will continuously support the well-being of our patients, their families, and our teams," for Michels,

the reality looks different.

Although her daughter was able to secure a prescription that will last for years, Michels feels guilty because not everyone has been as fortunate.

"I have already secured her ongoing care, which not everyone is going to be able to do," she said.

Michels also criticized the university for abandoning transgender children, claiming that the university's words of support for the community do not reflect actions in line with federal guidance.

"Don't send us another email about how much you care about civil rights," Michels said. "You say you won't tolerate totalitarianism; then why are you letting it run your hospital? We are coming for your pocketbook. ... Not a single cent of our money will go to you because we know that's all you really care about. We will not stand by while you abandon the kids who need you most."

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Friends of Friends of Dorothy
Puzzle can be found on page 21

This Is Big Freedia's Church

The New Orleans icon on queer faith and going back to church with 'Pressing Onward'



Big Freedia. Photo: Hunter Holder

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Big Freedia's voice has always been a force — loud, joyful, defiant — but on her new album, "Pressing Onward," it becomes something even more powerful: a vessel for healing.

The Queen of Bounce returns to her gospel origins on a deeply personal new project that fuses the church music of her youth with the high-energy New Orleans sound she helped bring to the mainstream. Inspired by her roots in New Orleans' Pressing Onward Missionary Baptist Church, the record wasn't born from grief, but now reflects it — alongside resilience, celebration, resistance and self-affirmation — following the loss of her partner of 20 years, Devon Hurst, in May, and at a time when the world feels especially hostile to trans and queer communities.

We talked about all of that: finding sanctuary in music, redefining what worship can look like and why this album might be the most Big Freedia thing she's ever done.

What is it about this era of political backlash against trans and queer people that made it the right time to finally blend your gospel roots with bounce music?

It's just perfect timing given the state of the world that we're in. But this album is also definitely a big part of my healing process right now. I just recently lost my partner of 20 years, and so this album has been definitely a help in that process, with being able to continue to give God the praise and glory even in my most toughest moments.

I'm very sorry to hear about Devon. I hope that you're taking good care of yourself.

Thank you. One day at a time.

What was happening in your world when you recorded these songs?

I was in a very happy space, going back to my childhood and my young adult days of being in a choir. Just really stepping back into those moments — they were kind of the best days of my life, just growing up in church, being young and full of energy, and finding out all about God, and who God is. It was a fun time in my life, and I'm just so happy to be able to finally be able to bring these moments forward and share them with the world.

Every queer person's journey with faith is different. I was raised Catholic and often felt like I had to choose between my identity and my relationship with God. This album feels like something I wish I had as a kid — it might've helped me feel like there was space for me in the church.

Well, everybody's welcome here at the Big Freedia gospel, no matter who you are, no matter what walk of life — Black, white, gay, straight. This is a church that don't judge you. This is a church that you could come and be

who you are and love who you want to love and also connect back with God, connect to your higher power and bring joy into people's lives. Every gay person definitely was not accepted in their church spaces, and I'm grateful to be able to have a church that accepted me and opened their arms really wide for me and allowed me to still continue to be myself.

Did your faith help you become closer to who you actually are?

Oh, most definitely. My church was my safe haven. It was a way for me to stay out of the hood and be protected from the things that I grew up around in my neighborhood — because I saw it all, from poverty, to drugs, to killings. And the church saved my life. My mom would always push us out to church on Saturday. Choir rehearsal on Sunday. We would be in Sunday school and church service sometimes on Friday night. My life was all about church. I stayed in church 24/7.

Bounce music and gospel might seem like unlikely siblings to some, but you blend them so seamlessly on this album. What was your approach to honoring both traditions without compromising either?

Just going in and being myself and bringing

Big Freedia to gospel. It allowed me to bring myself to those moments because bounce and gospel have similar feelings of spirit. When you come to a Big Freedia bounce show, it's like a revival, so they're very much connected with the spirits, especially culturally. Black Baptist churches, when we catch the Holy Ghost, or even when we do bounce dancing, they're very similar to what we do here in New Orleans.

This album carries a strong thread of healing, joy and perseverance. Which track was the most emotional or cathartic for you to record?

One of the tracks that really sticks out to me and really touches my soul is "Let It Rain" — wanting God's blessings to continue to rain down over me like a tornado. It's one of those songs that is really touching my spirit and my soul. There's so many great songs on there, like "Highway to Heaven," "All I Need" and "Holy Shuffle," just all different things that really touch me. And I'm grateful for every song on this album. You know, it was so hard to get to the 14 songs that I did pick out of 40 songs. I have about 40 songs written and all of them were recorded demos. And so we had to narrow it down to 14. So, hopefully, there's

See **Big Freedia**, page 22



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◀ MCC-SF

Continued from page 14

everything else that made up a person could be acknowledged together. That was pretty radical.

MCC is not a church that ministers to people with AIDS, which implies a certain distance or a kind of charity. It became a church with AIDS, with no separation between the two. 150 Eureka Street hosted the first San Francisco ACT UP meetings, buyers club activity and the distribution of medical marijuana in the church's building by the church's clergy. (Editor's note: Buyers clubs were groups formed to provide access to HIV therapies that had yet to be approved by the Food and Drug Administration.)

Can you give us insight into the crafting of *When We All Get to Heaven*?

The three of us spent years listening to tapes. We did not listen to all 1,200 cassettes, but we did digitize a core collection of 325 from which we made our selections. We had to make a lot of hard decisions. It was important to us that the podcast be about a church as a whole. In writing, we imagined a choir, where sometimes you hear a mélange of voices, sometimes you have a soloist and the choir responds or sometimes you have a duet or a quartet for a piece.

The challenge then became how do you make episodes? Sayre Quevedo, our story editor, helped us shape moments of tape and characters we knew we were interested in into arcs.

What has been the reaction from MCC?

It matters to MCC members that these stories are being preserved and told. The difference between memory as they remember it and history as it actually unfolded is wild for folks.

I was talking to somebody the other day about protease inhibitors, which in the Bay Area became available in 1995. In 1998, the Bay Area Reporter, which was the largest gay paper in San Francisco, had a headline: "NO

OBITUARIES." The medications changed the tenor of the epidemic so much that there was, for at least one issue, not one AIDS-related death in the paper. Many people remember that headline coming out. But the guy I was talking to remembered the headline being the same year as the drugs were released, not three years later. I think this engagement with one's own personal timeline of what happened has been both challenging and moving for people.

What does it mean for you to release the podcast right now?

At the beginning, we had a vision that we are living in a world that is going through crises that have no end. We were thinking mostly of climate change, racial injustice and economic inequality.

Then Covid happened. One of the first things that surprised me was the level of contempt those in power had for people. I had naively thought that the contempt we saw in early AIDS was about the kinds of people who got it and that after AIDS we would not see that again. Now the contempt is so explicit, and it extends to everyone.

Listening to the tapes and what we have done with them speaks loudly to things that happened and that are happening now. When it comes to AIDS, especially in the pretreatment years, the story seems simple: It was bad, then people with AIDS acted up and then there was treatment. In reality, though, it was week after week of death, outrage, insult, physical pain and suffering with no clear relief in sight.

MCC offers a model of how to gather, engage and be together when things are really bad and you don't know what's going to happen. When *We All Get to Heaven* has become a much more specific project than I thought it would be, and it feels like a good time to put it out in the world.

Ted Kerr is a contributor to POZ. This column is a project of TheBody, Plus, Positively Aware, POZ and Q Syndicate, the LGBTQ+ wire service. Visit their websites — <http://thebody.com>, <http://hivplusmag.com>, <http://positivelyaware.com> and <http://poz.com> — for the latest updates on HIV/AIDS.

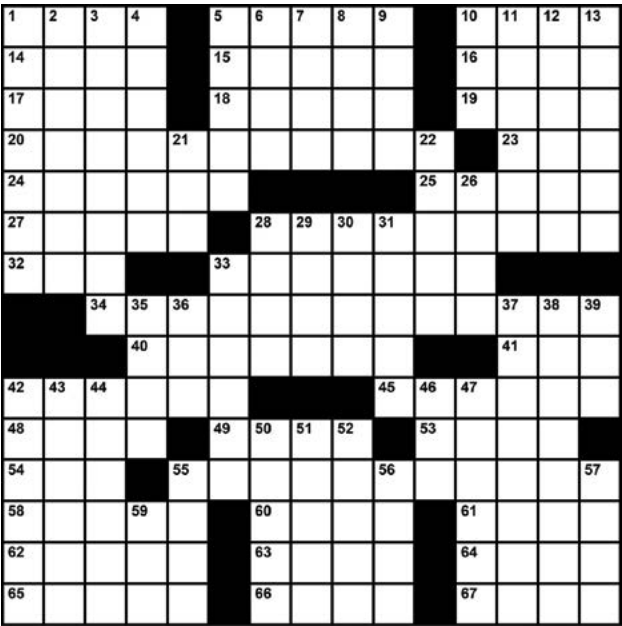
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Dorothy

Across

- 1 Asks from one’s knees
- 5 Burn with water
- 10 Per person
- 14 Drag queen’s stocking shade
- 15 One that can be paddled at the stern

- 16 Male actor named Julia
- 17 Michelangelo’s David, once
- 18 “The end of ____”
- 19 Painting and sculpture, to da Vinci
- 20 Singer of “You Need to Calm Down”
- 23 Airline in “The Aviator”
- 24 Crude carriers
- 25 Egg-shaped
- 27 Formal orders from James I
- 28 Typos
- 32 Taxpayer’s ID
- 33 Least difficult to get into bed
- 34 Batman portrayer who raises

- funds for GLSEN
- 40 Most like David Bruckner movies
- 41 Greeting to Maria
- 42 Woman in a Beach Boys song
- 45 Confidential matter
- 48 Like communion at the Cathedral of Hope
- 49 Brother of Michael Jackson
- 53 Teri of _Tootsie_
- 54 “That’s ____ quit!”
- 55 He lit the White House in rainbow colors
- 58 Stars that shoot off
- 60 Trick joint, maybe
- 61 Tiny bit of matter
- 62 Where Dick Button performed
- 63 Richard of “A Summer Place”
- 64 Peter by the piano
- 65 David Cicilline and Tammy Baldwin hold them
- 66 “____ Let the Sun Go Down on Me”
- 67 Fruity drinks

Down

- 1 Gives, as a gift
- 2 Desserts that shoot cream in your mouth
- 3 Arctic fish
- 4 Rent what you rent
- 5 Harold’s facial marks in “The Boys in the Band”
- 6 Pink-slips
- 7 De novo
- 8 Petty of “Orange Is the New Black”

- 9 Unresponsive, with “to”
- 10 Constellation over Sydney
- 11 Country singer Dolly, beloved by queer fans
- 12 Openly gay comic?
- 13 Asks on bended knee
- 21 Areas for Dr. Kerry Weaver
- 22 Trunk of Mapplethorpe photos
- 26 Activist Russo
- 28 Christmas threesome
- 29 Frasier’s response to a client
- 30 Commands to attack
- 31 Assails with snowballs, e.g.
- 33 Periodical boners
- 35 Start of a rhyme about a tiger
- 36 Ref for Woolf
- 37 What Tomlin did for “Celluloid Closet”
- 38 From here to eternity
- 39 To date
- 42 Beasts seen on safaris
- 43 Knee-slapper
- 44 Wilde who plays queer characters and is a supporter of gay rights
- 46 A male celeb may have a big one
- 47 At the beach, take off your clothes here
- 50 Got under one’s skin
- 51 Brando’s last one was in Paris
- 52 Swell place
- 55 Queens rule over them
- 56 He wore Superman’s clothes
- 57 Israeli author Oz
- 59 Thespians do it

See p. 17 for answers



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a second Big Freedia album, or a deluxe version, that will be coming out where you'll get the ones that didn't make it.

How do you personally define worship now? Is it still tied to a church building, or has it become something bigger?

Well, it's not exactly tied to a church building, because a lot of times I'm on the road. But we have gospel Sundays in the van. We pray before everything that we do, especially a show. This team is built on prayer and faith; we all come from church, we're all church babies. For gospel Sundays, everybody's picking their favorite gospel songs. It's about your connection with God. The church is the people, the place where we go. The building is just the building. The church is made up by the people.

Some of these songs are so big and vibrant — I can imagine what they must feel like performed in a church setting. What did it feel like for you in a recording studio?

Oh, I had a great time. In those moments, I was just giving God the glory and the praise, sitting back thinking about when I was a child and growing up in the Baptist church. It just brought back so many great memories and I was able to be in there in my true element.

I grew up with the belief that God wasn't for me. As I've gotten older, we obviously have people — far-right Evangelicals — who might look at a record like this and think that since you're gender nonconforming, you can't have a relationship with God. What do you say to those people?

God loves everybody, no matter who we are. God loves us all. He knows everything about us and who we are before we even know who we are. So don't let nobody tell you that you can't love God because you're gay.

Right now, we're seeing trans and gender-nonconforming people fight just to exist. Did you feel a kind of responsibility, or even a righteous anger, while making this album?

No. I did it for me more than anything, and when I do music for me, I give it my all. I put my best foot forward, and I know that if I love it, my fans are going to love it, and that's where I was at with it. I just went in a studio and gave my absolute best with this

album, and I think it's my best album yet.

You've got some iconic collaborators on it, including Billy Porter, Tamar Braxton and K. Michelle. What did each of them bring into the room creatively and spiritually?

Everybody also has a church background. So everybody was able to bring their flavor to the Big Freedia gospel. I gave them free range to be able to do whatever they felt and to bring their vibe and their spirit to the record, and so they did exactly that. And I'm so grateful for all of my collaborators. I also have Dawn Richard on there, and it's just an amazing project. I hope that the world gets to enjoy it like I'm enjoying it.

Have the people who went to the church you grew up in heard any of the album, and what do they think?

I know for sure my godmother, Georgia,

I admire that you've been so open about the loss of Devon. I can't imagine what that must feel like for you.

It's been the hardest, toughest two months of my life losing Devon, you know. It's something that I never expected, especially not that soon. I'm just taking it one step at a time, and I continue to ask God to give me strength.

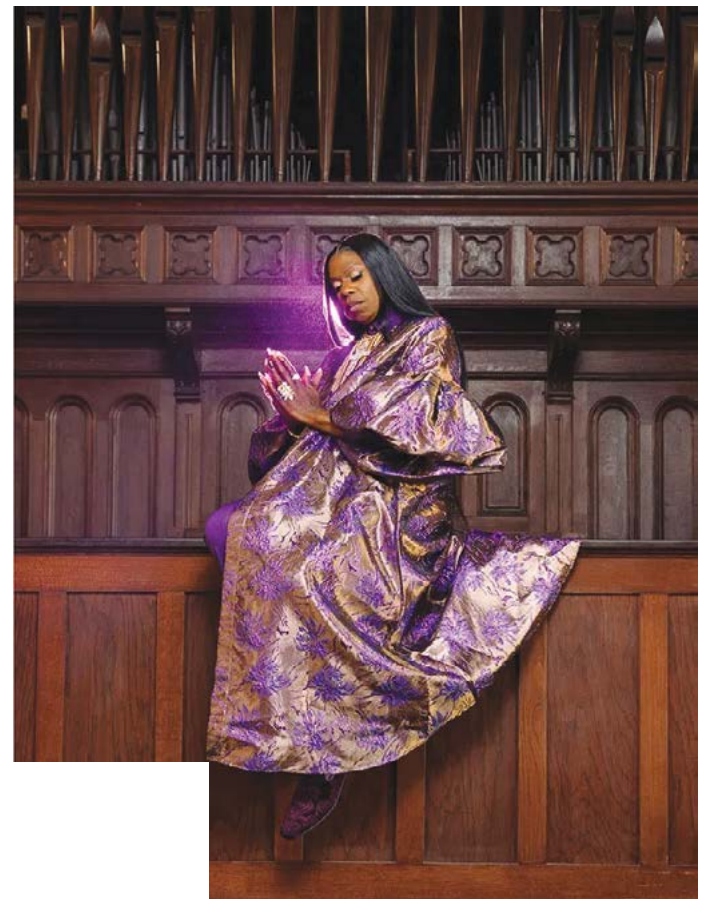
Does it change the way that these songs resonate with you?

“God loves everybody, no matter who we are. God loves us all. He knows everything about us and who we are before we even know who we are. So don't let nobody tell you that you can't love God because you're gay.”

the head choir director at Pressing Onward; she was there with me while I did the recordings. She was a full part of the process of making this album and so I dedicated a part of this album to her. Part of the album is also dedicated to Devon, who got to hear and listen to the album before his passing. So this is a very special record for me, and I have to continue to press on, even in the midst of my times of grief and loss and hardships right now.

Oh yeah, most definitely. These songs are my healing process. It's helping me to be able to get through these moments. These are some really, really tough moments, some tough days, some tough nights. Being with somebody for 20 years and not being able to come home to them any longer... the music is what's helping to feed the soul and feed the spirit.

I'm thinking about all the things that you've accomplished in your long



Big Freedia. Photo: Hunter Holder

career, and it's a long list. A hotel opening in 2026, a cannabis brand, this gospel album. What's still on the list of things that you'd like to accomplish?

There's so many things that I want to do. Some here locally in New Orleans, like opening a homeless shelter. There are many things that I want to continue to do to help to elevate the community and those in the music industry. I want to keep on breaking barriers and opening more doors for other people to walk through and bring their music to the world. Give advice. Just the whole nine yards of opening the pathway, making it even bigger, and elevating bounce to the next level and continuing to push New Orleans artists and other artists around the world to be able to be themselves. If I did it, they could do it as well.

You reached a career pinnacle when you guested on Beyoncé's "Break My Soul" in 2023. What goes through your mind now knowing your voice is such a powerful part of a Beyoncé song that had such a global impact?

I'm just forever grateful to Beyoncé and to the Beyhive for being able to collaborate with great artists like Beyoncé and to cross-collaborate with different genres of music and represent New Orleans and put New Orleans culture on the map. It's a big thing for me, and I'm forever grateful.



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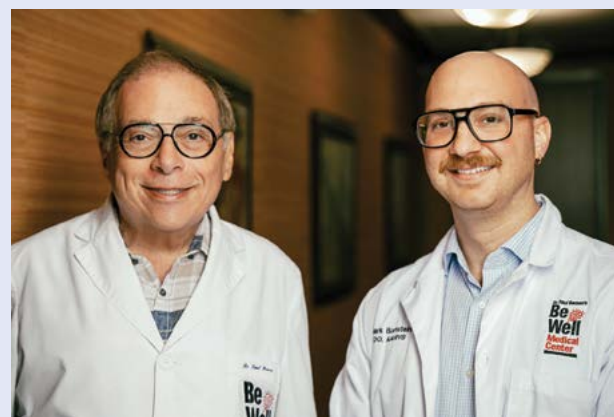
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